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The U.N. at 40: myth and reality

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This year marks the 40th anniversary of the founding of the United Nations. It already has sparked dozens of speeches by former and current U.N. delegates, U.N. and government officials, and private individuals.

Too many of the retrospectives regrettably allow admirably high hopes and idealism to substitute for facts and data. In truth, what the record of the past 40 years shows is that the U.N. in many respects has lost its way. It has failed to fulfill the major goals of its charter — to promote the peaceful settlement of international disputes; enhance human rights and fundamental freedoms; cooperate in solving international economic, social, cultural, and humanitarian problems; and develop "friendly relations among nations."

Despite — or perhaps because of — these failings, U.N. boosters have created a "mythology" about the U.N. They try to insulate the organization from its constructive critics and to shift the blame for its failings onto other organizations and nations, particularly the United States, which has been among its strongest supporters. Among the myths, here are the most widespread — and most damaging to the United Nations in the long run.

Myth No. 1: The U.N. is still in its infancy.

At four decades old, the U.N. is no child. It is indeed so old that only four of the delegates to the 1945 San Francisco conference are still alive. The U.N. has existed 14 years longer

than the League of Nations had at its demise and is older than NATO, the Warsaw Pact, the Common Market, the Organization of African Unity, the Organization of American States, and scores of other international organizations.

As such, the U.N. cannot be treated as an "infant," "child," or "embryo." Its actions must be judged as those of a fully mature entity.

Myth No. 2: The U.N. should not be taken too seriously, since it basically is ineffective and allows countries to "let off steam" harmlessly.

Far from being the world's safety valve, the U.N. often fuels, rather than reduces, international tensions. "Pariah" nations, such as Israel and

El Salvador, are chosen and made the focus of hatred, making conflict resolution in their regions even more difficult. Instead of venting steam one day and returning to rational discussion the next, the supposedly injured parties in any one of several global disputes endlessly vent steam, promoting conflict, rather than conflict resolution.

Myth No. 3: The U.N. bears no responsibility for the statements or actions of its individual members.

This is a silly argument. The fact is that the U.N., by its rules, traditions, and special culture, has allowed and even encouraged nations to behave at the U.N. in certain ways. This does not mean the U.N. is responsible for what its members say at the organization. Yet the organization still must bear responsibility for institutionally leading its members in a certain direction.

Myth No. 4: The U.N.'s humanitarian, economic, social, and cultural activities in themselves justify the U.N.'s existence.

It is widely recognized that a number of multinational agencies associated with the U.N. do provide humanitarian assistance to needy groups around the world. The U.N., however, scarcely can take credit for the good works of these groups. For one thing, some — such as the World Health Organization — existed long before the U.N.. For another, the success of many U.N. humanitarian programs may well be the result of the work of the many international and national voluntary agencies which run extensive aid and refugee programs throughout the developing world, such as the French voluntary

agency, *Medicins sans Frontieres*; Project HOPE; and scores of others.

Myth No. 5: The United States and New York City, in particular, benefit from the presence of U.N. headquarters in Manhattan.

Although many data are cited to support this myth, the most common are provided by the Office of the New York City Mayor, which claims that the financial benefits of the U.N. to New York City in 1980 were \$692.2 million. The trouble with that figure is that New York City got it directly from the U.N. Office of Financial Services. The U.N., in other words, cites an "official" New York City estimate, which the city government got from the U.N.

Moreover, such estimates ignore the hefty price the United States pays for providing headquarters for the U.N. The hundreds of Soviet-bloc spies who use the U.N. as cover and as a base of operations for espionage against the United States cost the United States an enormous amount in terms of stolen technology and increased defense outlays needed to offset the added vulnerabilities of U.S. weapons systems.

Myth No. 6: Though General Assembly resolutions do not mention or condemn the Soviet Union by name, neither do they so mention or condemn the United States.

This myth is simply wrong. While an unwritten but strictly observed commandment of U.N. behavior ensures that the Soviet Union is never rebuked by name in a U.N. resolution, the United States often is singled out for attack.

The U.N., for instance, has yet to condemn the Soviet Union by name for its invasion of Afghanistan. Yet in 1982 some 14 separate General Assembly resolutions denounced the United States by name; in 1983 that number rose to 16. U.N. Resolution 180D, for example, adopted Dec. 19, 1983, by a vote of 101 to 18, condemned the United States for signing strategic agreements with Israel. Yet it would be unthinkable for the U.N. to condemn the Soviet bloc for arming Syria or for sending 5,000 to 6,000 military instructors to that country.

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